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Contra defeat near, Nicaragua leader says

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UNITED NATIONS — President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua on Sunday defended the recent reimposition of a state of emergency in his country as part of a Sandinista strategy to defeat the U.S.-funded contra insurgents; a defeat he claimed is imminent.

"A matter of months," Ortega said confidently during a briefing for six U.S. journalists. Ortega is here to attend the U.N.'s 40th anniversary session this week, and

is the first speaker today as the General Assembly resumes its activity.

Ortega made it clear that his main mission here was to justify his government's widely criticized decision last week to reinstate the state of emergency that had been eased in 1984 in advance of national elections.

The resumption of emergency measures suspends most civil liberties including freedom of speech, assembly and travel. Also shelved were the right to habeas corpus, to strike and to the protection of privacy of the home and the mails.

"Of course, we were aware that this had an international public relations cost to Nicaragua ... [but] we had no choice since we believe that we are on the eve of achieving a strategic victory over the [contra] mercenary forces," said Ortega.

To support his claim, Ortega said that until a few months ago, Sandinista soldiers battled contras on four fronts — in the south, in the east along the Atlantic coast, in the north where the main rebel forces are and in the cities.

"But today the situation has changed favorably for the Nicaraguan revolution," Ortega said.

Southern forces under former Sandinista hero Eden Pastora have been "chased back to Costa Rica," Ortega said. Along the Atlantic coast, he went on, Miskito Indians who once were allied with contra forces have instituted a cease-fire and are negotiating with the Sandinistas.

As for the north, where the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) operates, Ortega said the thousands of rebels infiltrated earlier this year have been forced to flee back to their Honduran bases to regroup.

"There are still some pockets of FDN forces within Nicaragua, but these are being seriously undermined by our forces and are on the run," Ortega claimed.

In Washington, contra spokesman Bosco Matamoros strongly challenged Ortega's assertion.

"This mediocre, home-grown Stalin is mistaking his delirious dreams with reality," Matamoros said in a telephone interview. "The fact is that the Nicaraguan resistance is growing every day."

Matamoros estimated the number of rebels at 20,000, or at least 5,000 more than six months ago.

A U.S. intelligence official who is in touch with the contras echoed Matamoros' denial.

"What Ortega claims is pure rhetoric without foundation," said the official, who requested anonymity. "It is true the contras have been slow in launching spectacular or damaging actions against the Sandinistas, but that is only a natural consequence of the fact that for a year we couldn't help them due to a congressional prohibition and that now that we can help, there have been delays and screw-ups in delivering the aid."

The official was referring to last week's embarrassing action by the Honduran government of seizing part of the first U.S. shipment of supplies to the insurgents.

Ortega said that while the Sandinista government's military situation is improving, its economic picture is worsening partly because of a U.S. trade embargo and also because of the protracted internal war.

"Given these conditions," the Nicaraguan president noted, "we decided to re-establish the state of emergency. We also did it to complicate the plans of the CIA to mount a counteroffensive designed to erode our gains and prevent our victory over the contras."

Ortega acknowledged that restoring repressive measures was "regrettable." But he claimed that the Sandinistas had no choice.

"What was the alternative?" he asked. "A political cost with the international community, which, incidentally, has been incapable of stopping the North American aggression against Nicaragua, or risking the loss of the strategic victory we are about to achieve against the contras? We chose to reimpose the state of emergency."

He said that once Sandinista soldiers completely vanquish the contras, President Reagan will be faced with two choices: negotiation with Nicaragua or invasion of Nicaragua.

Since the possibility of Reagan authorizing negotiations with Managua is slim, Ortega said that even if his government defeats the contras it will maintain the state of emergency indefinitely because of the continuing danger of a U.S. invasion.

"The measures will be in effect as long as the United States does not change its objectives," he said. "The state of emergency will be rescinded when the aggression stops."